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ABSTRACT

This qualitative study examined the attitudes and interests of 284 gifted readers in grades 6, 7, and 8. Students were from a high socioeconomic status, suburban school district in the midwestern United States and were either identified as gifted or had a history of involvement in a program for the gifted. Data collection instruments included a three-part Likert rating of interest for 34 reading genre and the Mikulecky Behavioral Reading Attitude Measure (MBRAM). The following conclusions were drawn: readers displayed a high interest in mystery, humor, fiction, and magazines. They showed a low interest for reference, health, westerns, religion, geography, math, computer science, and how-to books. When the five stages of attitude internalization were evaluated from the MBRAM, it was found that females dominated the representation across grade levels and stages of attitude internalization with only slight differences evident in grade 7 for attending stage. Females also dominated at the higher levels of attitude internalization such as valuing, organization, and characterization. Declining interest in reading and in number of genres with age was also found. Results suggest a need for curriculum to incorporate genres of high interest while working to expand the number of genres of interest to middle school students. (Contains 11 references.) (DB)

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Gifted Middle Grade Readers: Attitudes and Interests in the 90's

Terrence V. Stange and Ellen J. Carter

ED 391 346

Abstract

A need for research about gifted middle reader attitudes and interests exists. This qualitative report involved the attitudes and interests of gifted readers in grades 6, 7 and 8. The participants comprised gifted middle grade students (N=282) from an upper socioeconomic and suburban school system in the Midwest. The data collecting instruments included a 3-part Lickert rating of interest for 34 reading genre and the Mikulecky (1976) Behavioral Reading Attitude Measure (MBRAM). Conclusions drawn from the data were as follows. Readers displayed a high interest in mystery, humor, fiction, and magazines. They showed a low interest for reference, health, westerns, religion, geography, math, computer science, and how to books. With only slight differences evident in grade 7 for the attending stage, females dominated the representation across grade levels and stages of attitude internalization.

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There is a shortage of research relating to attitude and interest for gifted intermediate readers in grades 6, 7 and 8. This investigation corresponds with the continuing interest in the reading process and internal and affective reading characteristics (Paris, Wasik & Turner, 1991). Although previous gifted middle grade investigations have explored interest and attitude solely or in combination and with other select variables and populations, this investigation sought to study the variables concurrently, to discover gifted middle grade reader interests and attitudes in the 1990's. Further, as Ley and Trentham (1987) earlier reported few studies exist involving gifted secondary school students, a phenomenon that continues today. This study embodied two research questions to focus the investigation of gifted intermediate reader interests and attitudes.

Research Question 1: What are the reading genre interests of gifted intermediate readers?

Research Question 2: What stage(s) of attitude internalization is/are evidenced by gifted intermediate readers?

Methods

Participants and Procedures

The participants included nearly the entire population of gifted middle readers (N=284) from three schools involving grades 6, 7 and 8. Approximately 20 students did not have an opportunity to participate in this investigation. The gifted students were from a

high socioeconomic and suburban school district of a midwestern state. The chronological age of the participants ranged from 10 years to 14 years with a mean age of 12.5 years. The number of females (n=129) represented 45.4% of the total participants which, compared with the number of males (n=155) represented 54.6% of the total participants. The representation by gender and grade, respectively, comprised females (n=36) and males (n=41) in grade 6 (n=77); females (n=58) and males (n=62) in grade 7 (n=120); and females (n=35) and males (n=46) in grade 8 (n=81).

The participants included students identified as gifted or students having a history of involvement in an intellectually gifted educational program. A criterion for enrollment in a gifted student program is the Baldwin Identification Matrix (BIM), revised September, 1990. The BIM embodies multiple factors in determining eligible gifted students for the school district program. Factors used in making such determination include scores on assessments such as the Henmon-Nelson IQ, Ross Test of Higher Cognitive Processes, California Reading Achievement Test (CAT), California Math Achievement Test (CAT), Renzulli Behavior as well as faculty and other recommendations. Customarily, a student requires a minimum 130 IQ to enroll in the program. However, a student not attaining this minimum criterion is often recommended by teachers, parents and/or community members for possible fall program placement. Next, the research methods, measures

administered and design and data analysis, are described. The use of data gathering measures occurred during the assessment period of the school term, when such activities as grading and evaluation typically happen.

Method

Measures

Reading Interest Inventory.

The interest inventory consisted of a paper and pencil survey listing varied reading genre and embedded numerical ratings for degree of interest: (1) low interest, (2) moderate interest and (3) high interest for each genre. The students rated their degree of interest for a type of reading material by placing a check mark on the blank indicating their degree of interest rating for that genre. Students rated a total of 34 genre or categories of reading materials. Space was also provided to graphically record names of books, paperbacks, magazines, newsprint and other print materials read. The interest inventory of this investigation represents an adaptation of the interest inventory (Hawkins, 1983) used in her study of gifted intermediate readers. The key modifications relative to the previous inventory involved adding new school and library (American Library Association) listings for reading genre and a numerical rating for degree of interest for each genre. As previously done, writing space existed on the survey to record names of

favorite materials like books, magazines and newspapers read by gifted readers.

Reading Attitude

The Mikulecky Behavioral Reading Attitude Measure (MBRAM, 1976), designed for middle and upper grade readers, was used to assess the attitude of gifted readers. The MBRAM theoretical base integrates the affective, cognitive and behavioral constituents of Hovland & Rosenberg (1960) and the levels of attitude formation of Krathwohl, Bloom, and Masia (1964).

The MBRAM instrument suggests each reader's current stage of attitude internalization related to the Krathwohl et al. (1964) affective hierarchy of attending, responding, valuing, organization and characterization, respectively. Students completed the 20 item attitude measure by encircling one number for each item. The numbers represent Lickert ratings with outer limits ranging from (1) "Very unlike me" to (5) "Very like me." The items correlate situational reading behaviors and the hierarchical stages of Krathwohl. At the lowest attitudinal stage of attending, the reader displays awareness and a tolerance of reading materials contrasted with the highest attitudinal stage of characterization, whereby, the reader interprets reading as momentous facet of one's life and the reader's value of reading is readily recognized by others.

The five (MBRAM) stages of attitude internalization characteristic of the taxonomy of Krathwohl et al. (1964) associates

each stage of a particular reading attitude with a particular reading circumstance. Examples of reading behavioral items related to particular stages of attitude are as follows:

Stage 1--Attending: 'You are waiting for a friend in an airport or supermarket and find yourself leafing through the magazines and paperback books.'

Stage 2--Responding: 'You've just finished reading a story and settle back for a moment to sort of enjoy and remember what you've just read.'

Stage 3--Valuing: 'Sometimes you find yourself so excited by a book you try to get friends to read it.'

Stage 4--Organization: 'One of your first impulses is to "look it up" whenever there is something you don't know or whenever you are going to start something new.'

Stage 5--Characterization: 'People who are regular readers often ask your opinion about new books.'

Each stage of attitude internalization has a cluster of three, four or six related MBRAM items. Mikulecky stated that a reader represents a certain stage of attitude internalization when his or her score matches or surpasses a 75% standard for the total points possible for an item cluster of a particular stage. This percentage criterion was arbitrarily determined by Mikulecky (1976).

Design & Data Analyses

The design of this research is qualitative and descriptive. The initial analyses and the report herein is qualitative with an emphasis on description and the search for numerical themes for gifted intermediate reader interest and attitude. This study represents a base-line analyses of gifted reader attitudes and interests. The analyses of the data embodied such descriptive analyses as measures of frequencies and percentages for categories in common and for Lickert ratings of gifted intermediate readers' interests and attitudes.

Results

Descriptive Data For Interest

The interest question posed for gifted intermediate readers comprised: What are the reading genre interests of gifted intermediate readers? Their interests for each reading genre were described in degree being: high, moderate or low. Student descriptions included such characteristics as grade and gender for high interest and low interest genre.

There were four high interest genres, eight low interest genres and twenty-two genres of moderate interest to gifted intermediate students with participant frequencies and traits identified for each genre. The data description includes genre and total group frequencies from high to low, correspondingly. The intermediate sample displayed a high interest in mystery (n=200), humor

(n=169), fiction (n=168), and magazines (n=157). Conversely, students indicated a low interest in the genres of reference (n=215), health (n=210), westerns (n=208), religion (n=201), geography (n=184), math (n=179) computer science (n=174), and how to books (n=173), respectively. As noted, compared the high interest genre, there were 4 more genre that gifted students had a low degree of interest for; and, the frequencies of students were higher for most of the low interest genre. The student frequencies differed by as much15 or16 points when comparing the genres of high and low interest. The remaining 22 genre listed on the survey were classified as at least "moderately interesting" to the participants. The genre in the moderately interesting category include: adventure, animals, autobiography and biography, classics, comic books, fantasy, history, medical/medicine, mythology, nature, newspaper, nonfiction, outdoors, outer space, patriotism, poetry, romance, science, science fiction, short story, sports and war. It is important to recognize that this interest data was derived from group comparisons of total group, gender and grade. Individual student differences exist for the high, moderate and low interest ratings for the reading genres listed.

The analyses also focused with respect to grade and gender on the highest and lowest number of students with a high interest for certain genres. Provided in context and after the genre classification, the total number of students favoring a genre for the

population provides frame of reference for making subgroup comparisons. Mystery (n=200) is enjoyed the most by grade 8 males (n=51) and enjoyed the least by grade 6 males (n=16). This differs from the results of Hawkins (1983) with students in all groups such as males and the brightest students in grades 4, 5 and 6 favoring the reading of mystery. More grade 7 males (n=40) displayed a high interest for the humor genre (n=169) compared to grade 8 females (n=16) with the least interest. Grade 7 females (n=39) exhibited the highest interest for fiction (n=168) compared to grade 8 males (n=22) for this genre. Grade 7 males (n=41) disclosed the highest interest for magazines (n=157) compared to grade 6 females (n=17) for magazines.

The analyses also focused with respect to grade and gender on the highest and lowest number of students with a low interest for certain genres. The low interest genres in rank order were reference, health, westerns, religion, geography, math, computer science, and how to books, respectively. More Grade 7 males (n=49) displayed a low interest in reference materials compared to grade 6 females (n=27). This result compares with Hawkins (1983) with male students and students in the lower intermediate grades being more likely to read reference materials even though not highly popular. As noted from the research of Hawkins, males frequently displayed more a penchant for nonfiction materials than females. It is important to encourage the reading of reference materials so that

further gifted student mental enrichment is possible. Grade 7 males (n=50) exhibited the highest number of students with a low interest for health compared to grade 6 females (n=18). More grade 7 females (n=47) indicated a low interest in westerns compared to grade 8 females (n=23). More grade 7 males (n=52) suggested low interest in religion compared to grade 8 females (n=17). More grade 7 males (n=41) indicated a low interest for geography in comparison to an equivalent frequency (n=27) for females and males in grade 7 and females in grade 8. Grade 8 males (n=28) indicated a similar low interest rating frequency for geography as well. More grade 7 males (n=43) showed a low interest in math compared to grade 8 females (n=23). It is disquieting to know that math, such an important academic tool, is not a genre that gifted students prefer. However, it is interesting and disturbing to observe the gender differences for math with more males indicated a low interest for math compared with females in grade 8. Certainly, one would like to see that math is valued by both genders. Grade 7 females (n=47) represented the highest number of students with a low rating for computer science compared to the low number of grade 6 males (n=13) with such rating. More grade 7 females (n=41) displayed low interest for How to books compared to grade 6 females (n=22). Similarly, grade 8 females (n=23) also displayed a similar low rating for the how to book genre.

Descriptive Data For Attitude

The original question posed for gifted intermediate attitude was: 1-What stage(s) of attitude internalization is/are evidenced by gifted intermediate readers? The total participants displayed characteristics representing all of the five Krathwohl stages of attitude internalization. Readers in the attending stage I (n=202) represented 71.1% of the participants. In stage I, readers are typically aware and tolerant of reading. Gifted students in the responding stage II (n=144) characterized 50.7% of the participants. In stage II, readers are willing to read under certain circumstances. They begin to choose and occasionally enjoy reading. Gifted students in valuing, stage III (n=88), included 30.9% of the participants. In stage III, readers begin to accept reading as a value to be preferred and they extend the value to others. Gifted readers in the organization, stage IV (n=47) comprised 16.5% of the participants. For readers in stage IV, reading is part of an organized value system and is so habitual that it is almost "instinctive." Gifted readers with the most well developed attitude called characterization, stage V (n=30) embodied 10.5% of the total participants. For readers in stage V, reading is so much a part of life that both the reader and others see reading as crucial to this person.

Gender, grade and combined comparisons of each stage of attitude internalization relative to the affective taxonomy

(Krathwohl's et al., 1964) suggests that differences exist for the attitude formation of gifted intermediate readers. In the attending stage, females represented 52.5% of the students at this stage compared to males with 47.5%. By grade, 23% of the students at this stage are in grade 6, compared to 44.5% of the students in grade 7, and 32.5% of the students in grade 8. By gender and grade, 14% of females and 9% of males in grade 6 make up the attending stage, contrasted with 15% of females and 16% of males in grade 7, and 25% of females and 21% of males in grade 8. Females dominated in the lowest stage of attitude in grades 6 and 8. The percentages of students at this stage increased slightly throughout the grades with females in grade 8 having the highest percentage representation.

In the responding stage, females represented 62% of the students at this stage compared to males representing 38%. By grade, students in grade 6 composed 30% of the students at this stage compared to 39% in grade 7 and 31% in grade 8. By gender and grade, 18% of the females and 11% of the males in grade 6 are in the responding stage compared to 26% of females and 14% of the males in grade 7, and 18% of the females and 13% of the males in grade 8. Females dominated overall and in all grades in the responding stage, and especially, in grade 7.

The student composition at the valuing stage indicated that 60% of the students at this stage are female and 40% are male. By

grade, 34% of the students in grade 6 are at this stage compared to 38% of the students in grade 7 and 28% of the students in grade 8. By gender and grade, 23% of the females and 11.5% of males in grade 6 are in the valuing stage, compared with 22% of females and 16% of males in grade 7, and 11.5% of females and 16% of males in grade 8. Females have the highest representation overall and in grades 6, 7 and 8.

The organization stage is represented with 60% of the students being female and 40% of the students being male. By grade, 24% of the students are in grade 6 at this stage compared to 50% of students in grade 7, and 26% of the students in grade 8. By gender and grade, 15% of females and 9% of the males in grade 6 are in the organization stage, compared to 28% of females and 22% of males in grade 7; and, 17% of the females and 9% of the males in grade 8. Females have the highest representation overall and in all grades with the percentage being most prominent in grade 7.

Characterization is composed by 80% of females and 20% of males. By grade, 37% of the students at this stage are in grade 6, compared to 30% of the student in grade 7 and 33% of the students in grade 8. By gender and grade, 33% of females and 3% of males in grade 6 composed the characterization stage, compared to 20% females and 10% males in grade 7, and 27% females and 8% of males in grade 8. Females dominate overall at the characterization stage and in all grades and particularly in grade 6.

Discussion And Conclusions

The gifted reading curriculum needs to incorporate the genres or materials of high interest such as humor, fiction and magazines and mysteries with gifted intermediate readers. Furthermore, there is need to expand the number of genres of interest to middle grade gifted readers. Perhaps, gifted interests can be expanded by modifying curriculum with this purpose in mind. An earlier study of gifted readers in grades 4 and 5 (Carter, 1994) found that suspense, mysteries, realistic fiction, adventure, action and fantasy are popular among gifted readers. It is curious why the number of interesting genres for gifted intermediate students (involving students from the same population) decrease over time. What is responsible for the decrement? Are these changes due to curriculum factors, bio-physiological factors, psychological factors, social factors or a combination of such factors or other factors, yet to be defined? It is logical that gifted reader interests for the varied reading genre would continue to expand with continued reading and book experiences. However, in the present study, the students did not follow such logic and rather showed a decrease of interest for genres being read. The study herein corresponds with the gifted middle reader findings of Hawkins (1983) in which fiction, adventure, mystery, humor and fantasy were popular genres.

Attitude changes normally occur in students in the their middle years and perhaps such changes may account for the declining interest of this population. Ley and Trentham (1987) proffered a number of studies (e.g., Education Commission of the United States, 1981; Estes, 1971; Johnson, 1964; Mikulecky ,1976) showing that the attitude of children becomes more negative over the years. Perhaps, such negativity accounts for the decline of reading interests as children grow older. Similarly, the student attitudes and the amount of willful reading decreased over time in grades 6, 7 and 8 (Ley, Schaer & Dismukes, 1994). Their study showed a statistically significant and positive correlation for reading attitudes and behaviors of middle readers. Analyses showed no significant gender or ethnic differences involving attitudes and behaviors. Their study provides reinforcement that declining interest is often characteristic of gifted intermediate readers as shown in the present investigation.

It appears that gifted students in this study need to have their curriculum explored and possibly changed to incite interest for reading genres classified as low interest by them. It seems atypical to discover that gifted readers display a low interest in the genres of computer science, how to books, math, geography, health and reference. As in Hawkin's study, gifted students, particularly boys, preferred nonfiction books. One normally expects that nonfiction and informative genres are significant to a developing mind.

Most gifted readers responded to the survey suggesting that they are in the attending and responding stages of attitude formation. Furthermore, females tended to have a more mature reading attitude compared to males. These findings correspond to research by Ley and Trentman (1987) that the majority of gifted readers in Jr. High reflected the attending and responding stages of attitude internalization and with females dominating in attitude typically across the stages of attitude formation and grade levels.

Females at all grade levels dominated in each stage of attitude internalization compared to the slight accretion for grade 7 boys in stage I or attending. The idea of females having dominance in the lower levels of attitude is antithetical to the findings of Ley & Trentham (1987) in which males dominated at lower levels. As in this preliminary study, females dominated in the higher levels of attitude internalization such as valuing, organization and characterization.

It is important to acknowledge the areas in which gender differences are prominent with females dominating in particular stages and grades. Females tended to dominate in attending in grade 8, responding in grade 7, valuing in grades 6 and 7, organizing in grade 7, and characterization in grade 6.

It is interesting to note the advanced attitude formation of grade 6 readers. More students in grade 6 and especially females, suggested an attitude typical of stage V or characterization. These

grade 6 readers have an attitude in which reading is a highly valued part of their lives and, this fact is readily observed by others in their surroundings. Characterization represents a greater cognitive involvement in reading attitude compared to gifted readers in grades 7 and 8 (Krathwohl et al., 1964).

Limitations of the Study

This interest and attitude study is limited to gifted intermediate children in grades 6, 7 and 8 and to a high socioeconomic and suburban school district in a Midwestern state. City and rural school systems in other parts of the country necessitate research. This investigation could even be extended to other populations such as "at risk" learners and average students enrolled in a typical developmental curriculum. Other secondary grade levels with students in accelerated and customary curriculum warrant study also.

The preliminary research is limited to descriptive analyses of critical variables related to interest and attitude. Perhaps, experimental interventions involving the effects of varied curriculums on interest and attitude of gifted intermediate readers may be conducted in the future.

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